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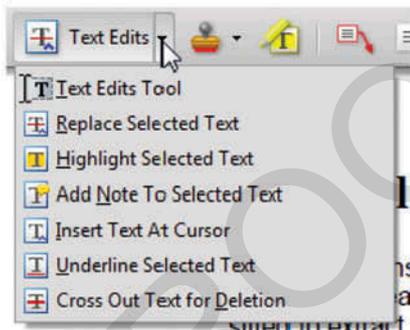
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Book Review

Digital ethnography: Anthropology, narrative and new media

by Natalie M. Underberg and Elayne Zorn
Austin, TX: University of Texas, 2013, 127 pages
ISBN-13: 978-0292744332 Price \$ 40.50

Reviewed by Paolo Cardullo, Goldsmiths, University of London

Many would agree that social life has become increasingly digitised and global. Researchers making sense of these vast amounts of data and disseminating their findings via digital technologies are posing new methodological challenges to disciplines such as anthropology. On the other hand, there is a sense in which the digital revolution may also offer extraordinary opportunities: the ethnographer's toolbox has expanded with new devices, connections, codes and technologies of dissemination. These demand new expertise that academics may not always have.

Digital Ethnography presents new media 'as tool for creative expression, anthropological research, heritage-based education, and new models of collaborative research' (81). It presents case studies separated into three main threads explored across six chapters: digital storytelling as an ethnographic representation (in 'PeruDigital', a web portal aiming at interpreting Peruvian festivals); cultural heritage projects using XML mark-up language as a new tool for analysis (in 'Digital Diaspora', an oral history project involving South American migrants) and game design as a learning device (in 'The Turkey Maiden', which explores a Spanish folk tale). The research projects described are based in Florida, and focus on urban ethnic minorities in diaspora and their interactions with local heritage. As such, they often foreground a new and contested vernacular landscape of public memory.

The main strength of *Digital Ethnography* lies in its ability to present a balanced theoretical and practice-oriented overview of the intersection between anthropology and digital media, across disciplines and beyond academia. It is a manual for ethnographers to carry out 'culturally responsible aims' (8) in digital

media projects, that is, to coordinate, understand the connections within, and build the infrastructure for, digital-based projects. In dealing with the challenges brought about by digital methods, ethnographers need to work with technicians, digital artists, media experts, hackers and designers to make a 'creative hack jam' of visual storytelling. As the authors put it, 'multimedia ethnography ... clearly demonstrates the boundary crossing of academic practice' (17). 45

Underberg and Zorn's research and dissemination practices provide fruitful efforts to fill the gaps between presumed 'real-life culture' and the 'virtual embodiment' of the 'digital simulation' (11). Whilst the postmodern turn communicated the sense that literary ethnography was less of a truthful narrative than a fictional storytelling practice, *Digital Ethnography* tries to convince sceptics that virtual storytelling is not just a fictional simulation of an 'out-there' reality. Forms of visualisation, whether in the form of still and film production or in digital exploration, cannot be treated as an external representational epistemology. They produce material effects and establish relational and affective links among stakeholders, whether researchers and technicians, or users and the researched. As the authors rightly suggest, 'multimedia and sensory ethnography acknowledges that ethnography is both process and product' (10). It demands a different attentiveness, across and beyond disciplines, from researchers who want to tune into a 'live' world (Back 2012). Despite such generous efforts, the book maintains, in my view, too prudent a tone. This may hinder the opportunities offered by digital media, by confining them within yet another 'subfield' of a 'subdiscipline'. 50 55 60 65 70 75

REFERENCE

Back, L. 2012. "Live Sociology: Social Research and Its Futures." *The Sociological Review* 60: 18–39. doi:10.1111/j.1467-954X.2012.02115.x. 80

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